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ABSTRACT

Eighty disadvantaged black third grade students were administered both reading achievement and oral language tests to determine whether the phonology, morphology, and grammar of Black English dialect have more effect on the below-average readers of the group than on those students making satisfactory reading progress. Student scores on the "Metropolitan Reading Achievement Test" were used to divide the sample population into 40 average readers and 40 below-average readers. "The Gross Pronunciation Test of Dialect Speech" and "A Measure of Standard English Proficiency" were used to evaluate the students' Black English phonology-morphology differences and their use of grammatical structures. In general, the pupils from the below-average reading groups received lower mean scores on all variables than did the pupils in the average reading groups. The findings suggest that, in addition to such factors as intelligence, social adjustment, sensory disorders, and environment, Black English dialect may contribute to reading failure of disadvantaged black students. (RL)

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The Effect of Black English Dialect Differences on the Reading Achievement of Disadvantaged Black Pupils from Average and Below Average Reading Groups

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The Effect of Black English Dialect Differences on the Reading Achievement of Disadvantaged Black Pupils from Average and Below Average Reading Groups

During the last fifteen years, many linguists have become concerned with the influence of Black English dialect differences on the reading achievement of disadvantaged Black pupils. They have found that the differences between the phonological, morphological, and grammatical systems of Black English and Standard English conflict to cause some degree of reading interference (Labov, 1967; Steward 1969; Dillard, 1972; Goodman, 1965; and Baratz, 1969). Most linguists basically contend that these differences constitute a major source of reading interference.

Important findings regarding the relationship of certain selected elements of Black English phonology, morphology, and grammar to the reading achievement of disadvantaged Black pupils have been established (Melmed, 1970; Garvey and McFarlane, 1970; Wiggins, 1970; Fillmer and Hurt, 1972; Gross, 1967; Baratz, 1969; Rystorm, 1968; and Weber, 1970). However, little research has been conducted to determine whether the phonology, morphology, and grammar of Black English dialect have more effect on the reading achievement of disadvantaged Black pupils from below average reading groups than on those pupils who are making average or satisfactory reading progress. The present investigation was designed to examine some aspects of this problem.

Sample and Procedure

The sample for this investigation consisted of eighty third grade disadvantaged Black pupils randomly selected from two predominantly Black elementary schools located in the poverty sections of Houston, Texas. Each school qualified for Title I funds. From two third grade classes within each school, twenty pupils were randomly selected. Each sample included ten pupils from average reading groups and ten from below average reading groups.

All pupils selected for this investigation were administered The Metropolitan Reading Achievement Test, Form F, Level Primary II to ascertain their reading grade levels. Following the administration and scoring of this test, the pupils' total raw reading achievement scores were converted to grade equivalent scores and ranked from high to low. After the median split was established, the complete sample of eighty pupils was subdivided into two equal groups of forty pupils. Specifically, the forty pupils who scored above the median (3.0) were designated as average readers, and the forty pupils who scored below the median were designated as below average readers. The pupils in both groups were then matched and paired according to sex, age, and grade.

The following oral language tests were administered to each pupil in both groups: (1) The Gross Pronunciation Test of Dialect Speech (Gross, 1968), and (2) A Measure of Standard English Proficiency (Garvey and McFarlane, 1968). The Gross Pronunciation Test of

Dialect Speech was designed to evaluate the pupils' Black English phonology-morphology differences. This test included those Standard English phonology-morphology features often mispronounced by Black English dialect speakers. This test consisted of forty-eight sentences designed to elicit twenty-four consonant clusters of words in the morphemic position. Some features that were included were final consonant clusters of words, such as the "nd" of wind, "th" of breath, and the "sk" of desk. A Measure of Standard English Proficiency was designed to evaluate the pupils' Black English grammatical structures or forms that are often mispronounced or distorted by Black English speakers. Some of the forms on this test were the possessive "s," the plural "s," the third person singular "s," the plural verb were, the reflexive pronoun himself, embedded questions with whether, negation with indefinites a and either, and the plural noun form cents. Only fifteen structures were included in this test. Both tests were administered separately to each pupil in one sitting.

Both oral language tests were scored in accordance with the prescribed procedures in the instructional manuals. The pupils' oral language samples were recorded and coded for identification and transcription for Black English dialect differences. Each pupil received a score of "1" for a Standard English response and "0" for a dialect response. The total oral language score for each test was determined by the number of "1's" each pupil received. A low total oral language score indicated that the pupil had a high degree of Black English dialect differences from Standard English in his

oral language patterns. Also, a higher total oral language score indicated that the pupil had fewer Black English dialect patterns and knew more Standard English.

Results

The means and standard deviations for each group on all variables are presented in Table 1. In general, the pupils from the below average reading groups received lower mean scores than the pupils from the average reading groups on all variables. This finding indicated that they had a greater degree of Black English dialect differences in their oral language patterns. Also, a one-tailed t-test applied to the differences between the means of both groups yielded a significant t-ratio 8.04 on the phonology-morphology variable and 7.67 on the grammatical variable.

Discussion

The findings of this investigation are in agreement with the majority of current research (Baratz, 1969; Labov, 1967; Wiggins, 1970; Melmed, 1970; and Goodman, 1965). Although other factors such as intelligence, social adjustment, sensory disorders, and other environmental factors may contribute to the reading failure of disadvantaged Black pupils, the present investigation demonstrates that the Black English dialect is definitely a contributing factor.

TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and t-Text for Each Group on the Phonological-Morphological and Grammatical Tests

Variables	Groups	$\overline{X}$	SD	t-Test
Phonology-Morphology	Below Average	18.35	4.25	*8.04
	Average	27.00	5.36	
Grammar	Below Average	6.65	2.65	*7.67
	Average	11.42	3.28	

* P. > .05

There are apparently two basic reasons why Black English dialect contributes to reading failure. First, the great difference between Black English and Standard English grammar patterns can cause the pupils difficulties with reading comprehension. Due to their lack of knowledge of Standard English sentence patterns, they are unable to make predictions and associations between standard English patterns. Consequently, they fail to obtain the basic meaning of a sentence that probably comes through to the nondialect speaker. Secondly, the pupils may not be able to hear many of the phonemes or morphemes of Standard English words that they fail to pronounce as a result of their Black English phonology or morphology differences. If they fail to pronounce the differences in certain phonemes, such as "i" or "e," they may fail to discriminate auditorily between these phonemes in words.

Both reading comprehension and auditory discrimination abilities are important facets of the reading skill. If the pupils have some difficulties in these areas, then their total reading achievement can be affected.

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